

Paritta (in Sinhala Pirit): Buddhist Chants

[For Security + Protection + Prosperity + Well Being]

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Humans in their day-to-day life are invariably exposed to a great deal of insecurity, we would say to a threatening amount of it, from diverse sources. The world we live in, whether created by anyone [Buddhists not subscribing to this idea], or evolved by itself into its present status, are too full of disasters from its natural elements. The earthquakes of Japan, India or California, volcanic eruptions of Vesuvius or anywhere else, devastating floods of the Ganges in Bangladesh or Mississippi in the U.S.A., or the cyclones in the Pacific or the Atlantic, including the more recent tsunami, are threatening enough to make humans appear like helpless children. But the Buddhists are taught to view them as elemental disturbances and as part of the very structure of the universe.

Our own human bodies, over the possession of which we are overwhelmingly proud, hold out a very wide range of threats. Most of us are not sufficiently conscious of the fragility of our human bodies [*pabhañ-guram*]. In a world of much advanced technology and incredibly fast moving objects like machines, motor vehicles and aircraft, human bodies which come too near them or are carried within them run the risk of being smashed on severe impact. Air-bags in automobiles which have now become a compulsory item in the manufacture of motor cars and crash-helmets for riders [including turbaned Sikhs] on countless models of motor bicycles are very naturally the outcome of a realisation of this risk to fragile human bodies.

Today, the lack of smoothness in human relations, between individuals, nations and more recently even between ethnic groups everywhere has contributed to our witnessing brutal incidents of human massacres of defenceless men, women and children all over the world. Arrogant claims of

political superiority, racial and ethnic supremacy and religious dominance are the primary contributors to these, almost in all the continents of the world, whether they are graded as developed or as less developed. These are areas in which the world owes it as a duty to provide to its people protection from aggressors and terrorists. Threats coming from these sources are far more unpredictable than the elemental ones where considerable research carried out internationally helps to avert disasters. This is why Buddhism fundamentally expects everyone to develop loving kindness or *mettā* [Skt. *maitrī*] to every other person, without any notions of difference or discrimination [*mettañca sabba-lokasmiṃ mānaṣaṃ bhāvaye aparimāṇaṃ* -- Metta Sutta or Karaṇiya Metta Sutta. Suttanipata vv. 143 - 152]

As for prosperity and well-being for humans, i.e. being prosperous, healthy and contented, this again is something which is very much in the hands of people themselves. People have to be wise and virtuous, energetic and enterprising. The Mangala Sutta [Suttanipata pp. 46 - 7] is virtually a complete prescription towards the achievement of this goal [*Etādisāni katvāna sabbattha-m-aparājitā sabbattha sotthiṃ gacchanti* = If all these items are put into -perfect practice, one shall never suffer failure or frustration. One shall always be blessed and blissful. loc. cit.]. This sutta is a complete manual for building up a successful and stable life, without any need for supplication to a power besides oneself. It provides for a many- tiered religio-cultural build-up by man for man.

Thus out of the three *suttas* or *tun sūtraya* which constitute the major corpus of the Paritta Recital, Mangala and Metta, far from being benedictory or invocatory in themselves, are prescriptive in character in that they lay down, with meticulous care, all details as to how a Buddhist should build up his social and religious stature so that he may keep his head up while those around are falling [*sabbattha-m-aparājitā*]. The Mangala Sutta spells this out in detail. It provides for a tremendous socio-cultural uplift.

The Metta Sutta, on the other hand, is religio-ethical in that it builds up one's

personal character with a very high spiritual quality, i.e. if only one were to diligently practice and live up to the ideals prescribed therein. One who does so becomes indescribably successful, firstly in his social life here. It is borne out by the presence of such adjectives with a prescriptive tone and emphasis like being 'efficient' [*sakko*], 'honest and up right' [*ujū ca sūjū ca*], 'courteous and polite in speech' [*suvaco*], 'gentle' [*mudu*], and 'humble' [*anatimānī*]. At the same time, it also guarantees complete spiritual success for oneself in this very life. Such a one, it is said, will not come to lie in a mother's womb, literally [*na hi jātu gabbha-seyyaṃ punar'etiti*], i.e. be born in *saṃsāra* any more. Our idea that this phrase implies the termination of life in *saṃsāra* is supported by a similar usage in the Dhaniya Suna [Sn. v. 29] where the Buddha says of himself as follows: *Nāhaṃ puna upessaṃ gabbha-seyyaṃ*.

We shall now endeavour to show through further scanning that the third of this triad, namely the Ratana Sutta uniquely stands out as our primary *paritta* or benedictory and invocatory chant. It uses the phrase 'May there be success and well-being by virtue of this truth ' [*etena saccena suvatthi hotu*], 3 times in the name of the Buddha, twice in the name of the Dhamma and 7 times in the name of the Saṅgha. It not only has a very valid basis on which to legitimise such a claim but also its phraseology *etena saccena suvatthi hotu*, in its very structure, indicates this. It fixes upon the *Ratana-ttaya* or the Holy Triple Gem as the basis for all invocations for personal well-being or *svasti* [Pali: *sotthi* or *suvatthi*]. It eulogises and fixes upon the greatness and uniqueness of the Buddha, Dhamma and the Saṅgha, and on the strength of that invokes happiness and well-being on the supplicant [*Idam 'pi buddhe...dhamme...saṅghe ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ etena saccena suvatthi hotu*]. This kind of esteemed trust in the *tisaraṇa* is accorded a very high position in the Buddhist scheme of salvation as is clear from the Dhammapada [vv.190 - 92] which refer to it as a *sine qua non* of Buddhist spiritual build up [*Yo ca buddhaṃ ca dhammaṃ co saṅghaṃ ca saraṇaṃ gato... etaṃ saraṇaṃ āgamma sabba-dukkhā pamuccatī*].

It is such understanding with a depth of conviction which builds into oneself such self-confidence to withstand all assaults which come in life, physical and mental, coming both from within and without. It is not enough hearing from others, a chanting monk or a taped cassette, say that 'Nothing anywhere, in any world, equals the Buddha in his greatness' [*Yaṃ kiñ ci vittaṃ idha vā huraṃ vā saggesu vā yaṃ ratanaṃ pañītaṃ Na no samaṃ atthi tathāgatenā*], but also feel it so within himself and breathe it out with his whole being to acquire that vitally essential built-in self-power. It equally applies to the Dhamma and the Saṅgha. As the Sutta eulogises the Dhamma, feel within yourself the vibrancy of *Khayaṃ virāgaṃ amataṃ pañītaṃ Yadajjhagā Sakyamunī samāhito* [= that state of complete extinction and total detachment which the Buddha himself attained through his composure]. While the Sutta eulogises the Buddha with three verses and uses two only for the Dhamma, it allocates seven verses for the eulogy of the Saṅgha. To the Buddhist, there could not be even a shadow [or an *avatāra*] of a fourth, human or divine, which he could eulogise. Entertaining

such thoughts of worshipful objects outside the *Sāsana* is said to reduce such a person to the level of a religious outcast or *upāsaka-caṇḍāla*, literally a *pariah* [...*ito ca bahiddhā dakkhiṇeyyaṃ gavesati tattha ca pubbākāraṃ karoti ... samannāgato upāsako upāsaka-caṇḍālo ca hoti upāsaka-malaṇ ca upāsaka-patikuṭṭho ca*. AN.II.206]. We wish you give serious consideration to this.

We have gained the conviction that Saṅgha constitutes the true discipleship in Buddhism. This is not to deny that many have gained higher reaches of spiritual uplift while being in the household. But undoubtedly it is not, in our opinion, the best nursery for spiritual germination or growth. *Pabbajjā* truly epitomises renunciation or *nekkhamma*. The Muni Sutta [Sn. vv.207-221] emphatically winds up saying that the lay disciple shall never equal or catch up with the monk who lonely meditates in the forest [*Evaṃ gihi nānukaroti bhikkhuno Munino vivittassa vanamhi jhāyato*. Sn. v. 221]. Therefore we feel that the Ratana Sūtra is making a definite bid, even within its invocatory structure as

a *paritta*, to present with clarity the perfect would-be-arahant monastic model which all Buddhists should sincerely endeavour to emulate.

It is the personal possession of such understanding and the conviction gained thereby to live that way that insulates and safeguards the possessor from all harm. The statement that *dhamma* guards and protects him who lives by it [*dhammo have rakkhati dhammacāriṃ*] is born out of this stand. Familiarity with *parittas* and their use in this way should serve as an ever active stabiliser in our lives.

Thus we feel that the regular chanting of these *parittas*, i. e. the three suttas or the *tun sūtraya* as they are popularly called [Mangala, Ratana and Metta], could be used as a marvellous booster for the enhancement of peace and prosperity in the lives of people. The generative power for such a positive turn in one's life is already seen to be contained in the Mangala Sutta in its thirty-eight items of *maṅgala* or blissful character traits [like *gāraṇa* = respectfulness, or *nivāta* = gentleness of demeanour] and dignified patterns of behaviour [like *māitā-pitu-upatṭhānaṃ* = respectful attendance on one's parents or *putta-dārassa saṅgaho* = diligent care of one's wife and children] which bolster the morale of family life and contribute to mutual build up of happiness in the home.

A family get-together [or even a joint inter-familial one] to chant these in collective unison in their homes could have a magical impact on any set of people who have even a modicum of religiousness or spirituality in them. Of course, the reciters must know what they are saying. They must be tutored in that. [We are in fact writing this little booklet of translation with an introduction to serve that purpose. It is for repeated reading and study. The chant of the *parittas* in Pali, in a taped cassette, would perhaps soon follow]. The benedictory power of all these *parittas* lie, we believe, more in the awareness and appreciation of their contents, and in the willingness of both the reciters and the listeners to be totally identified with the spirit of their contents. [The recital and the reciters in themselves would and should take a much less important

place.]. There should be minimum ritual in these. The *parittas* are not *mantras* like the *Gāyatri* in the Vedic texts. Nor should the reciters be looked upon like the Vedic priests of the category of *Hotṛ* or *Adhvaryu* [men with a magical potency in them].

We hold the view that it is not a day too early for the lay communities to rise to the occasion and make delightful domestic ceremonies out of these Paritta recitals like the *Gārhya-patya* of the Vedic Aryans. We say delightful as we visualise the coherence which such activity could bring about within the membership of the family, the family in its much-desired extended version, including within its fold the in-laws and the grand parents on both sides of one's parents- the mother and the father. They could make regular monthly religious functions of these in their homes, at least on the new moon days [active religious participation, if ever at all, now being mainly confined to the full moon days].

If one proceeds on these lines and restructures most of the religious activities more meaningfully, one would undoubtedly see a new wholesomeness emerging in the Buddhist communities. But unfortunately, priest-manipulated ceremonies in worship and prayer have already put the lay community into an idle position of sitting back and listening only. They have been robbed of their initiative, without any body ever realizing this. More and more *pūjās* are being performed on their behalf, and of course by *pūjaka* monks who, unwittingly though, have elevated themselves to the position of mediators between gods and men. Talismans with over-estimated claims and products of over-elaborated chants with divine mediations do reach our public via regular advertising media. These do indeed stupefy a vast segment of our credulous people and keep them deep frozen, away from and beyond any meaningful activity which could be reckoned as religiously or socially beneficial to any one.